TEM HORWITZ

Leadership Dynamics and the Governing Board of a Library Friends Group

Rather than attempt to lay down hard and fast rules or to set up models for the administration of a library friends group, I would like to share some observations about the structure, functions, and organizational patterns that appear to work best in tax-exempt, not-for-profit organizations. My remarks apply to situations where the friends group is legally empowered as the board of trustees or directors of a corporation; where this group is part of a larger governing body; and where this group is in reality an auxiliary board with limited or no formal power.

Every successful not-for-profit, tax-exempt organization with which I have worked has been blessed with one very strong guiding spirit. This person has usually been either the chairman or president of the friends group, or the executive director of the organization. There is always one person who has a vision, a strong will, and the commitment to see that this vision is translated into a program.

Over time, this function can change heads. In fact, it is common for there to be a seesaw relationship between the executive director of the library and the president of the friends board. When one is very strong, the other tends to be weak. The seesaw ceases to work when the movement stops, when either one of these figures remains in a static, extreme position. A chronically weak director is not likely to be effective in carrying out the directives of the friends group, and an ineffective chairman is unlikely to be able to oversee and to counsel the staff of an organization properly. If either figure is too dominant, the other is made ineffectual.

Board members may be inclined to look on their involvement as side actions, as unofficial, and perhaps even as an arrangement simply for show. These leaders should nonetheless be made aware of their responsibilities as executors of a public trust, and the point may be hard to get across. With no economic involvement in the corporation or financial incentives, friends may be inclined not to be all that serious in their commitment. Ultimately, library friends, like libraries themselves, cannot be evaluated, to the extent that their successes and failures can be seen in simple economic terms. Most

members of a friends group, accustomed to making evaluations in such terms, are likely to be unfamiliar with the ambiguities of library programs. The program which is the least cost-effective may be the most significant one that the library provides, and this program will attract future foundation support or, in a less immediate way, create enormous goodwill in the community. Not only do some of these equations become exceedingly complex, but the program evaluation itself may seem like it is taking place on shifting sands. Authority and credibility thus accrue to the leader who (if a few classic metaphors may be used) knows the game plan, is producing the show, and knows where the bodies are buried.

To use a more organic metaphor in describing friends groups, the president, working through the board, functions as the brain while the board, working through the membership, provides the independent functions that are performed by the organism. The group as a whole can be seen as a complex and shifting mixture of skills, interests, commitments, needs, goals, and desires. Given this complexity, without a guiding central intelligence, the group easily becomes an amorphous, conflicted, ineffectual organism. A board, like a well-cared-for bonsai plant, must continually be in the process of being shaped. The organization must always be asking what needs to be done, and who can do it.

It is common to look to friends to provide services the organization needs but is not anxious to pay for, e.g., accounting, design, printing, legal, fund-raising, advertising, architectural, and mailing services. It is a common fallacy for friends groups to seek out a congenial attorney, for instance, who is asked to be part of the group with the assumption that he will provide free legal services for the organization. Make sure that persons asked to join for this reason are actually interested in providing the service. An accountant may be attracted to a friends group mainly because it has nothing to do with accounting. The attorney may be delighted to serve and anxious to provide legal services, but may have no expertise in the kinds of legal problems with which friends groups are faced. The architect may be interested in redesigning the library auditorium, but will be annoyed when expected to work against a deadline. Many donated services are further accompanied with a heavy dose of "beggars can't be choosers." It may actually be cheaper and more efficient to pay for services that are available free from board members.

Members of a friends group are often made board members in the expectation that they will thereby be intimately connected to fund-raising efforts, i.e., they will give money, they will get their friends to give money, they will approach their friends at foundations and corporations for money, and they will organize events which will raise funds for the organization. None of these should be taken for granted. Find out in advance, to the

extent possible, what friends are willing and able to do as board members. We know, for generalizations, that people are strange in giving money and in asking other people for it. There are rich folk who are tight with their own money, but delighted to hit their friends on the library's behalf. Others find it extremely painful to ask anything from anybody. Still others can organize fund raising for large numbers of people with no problem. Remember that those with the most money — the obvious marks — are probably oversubscribed already. To anticipate the capabilities of members of a group requires an investment of time, energy, candor, and guile.

One of the most underused skills readily available to nonprofit organizations is that of management. American businessmen have worked out sophisticated ways of operating businesses, managing groups of workers, and making intelligent managerial decisions. Of course, not everyone who is successful in business is a good manager, and not every good manager will be effective in nonprofit work. There is, however, a large and relatively untapped reservoir of skills. Friends from the executive/managerial/business world can provide counsel to the staff, work as troubleshooters within the organization, and even restructure or resolve internal conflicts. A warning is in order, though: it is not uncommon for successful business people, consciously or unconsciously, to look down on managers of nonprofit organizations, viewing them as "sissies" or failed business people who can't make it in the "real" world.

Someone in the friends organization must know what is going on and have a day-to-day involvement in the affairs of the library. Logically, this person might be the library director. The friends group, either as a whole or in the person of its chief officer, must have an intimate knowledge of what is happening, how it is happening, and why it is happening. Someone must be able to see the whole picture, to be in a position to resolve internal problems, and to spot future areas of conflict. However the specific functions are divided, to work effectively the friends group must be potent.

The question remains, "where do board members come from?" Many groups seem hopelessly committed to the search for the rich and the famous, operating under the perhaps unarticulated assumption that the presence of "stars" will somehow miraculously solve the problems of the organization. This is the *deus ex machina* fallacy of board recruitment. As often as not, "stars" are already oversubscribed and underinspired. A better place to start is with friends and friends of friends who have made some contribution to the library. But be careful not to become too exclusively identified with one group or segment of the community. Care must be taken not to discourage from joining other groups that could be helpful, or to create the image of a private club. Figure out what groups, classes, and segments of the

public should be represented on your board. Draw up an overall plan and work from it, modifying it as you go along, but avoiding a haphazard selection process.

Someone must be in touch with each of the board members to communicate their decisions, attitudes, and achievements to either a committee or to the central figure on the board. This figure must understand why each of these individuals has agreed to be on the board, what they feel they can contribute, exactly what they are willing to do, and what they want from their involvement with the library. And this is tricky. Board members may talk about how important the library is to the community, but really be interested only in the points they hope to score from being on the board. Others may talk of civic responsibility, but feel that they have to serve on friends groups because their father and grandfather did; it is expected of those in their family. A member may want an arena in which to exercise some power. Persons may be driven by guilt because they have made so much money; they may be bored with their lives; or they may have a genuine need to serve. None of these motives is necessarily bad, but whatever the motivations, someone must understand them, must collect from each friend what he or she has to give and what the organization needs, while also providing for the personal needs and fulfilling the expectations of each member of the friends group.

The relationship between the head of the friends group or the director and the members of the friends group must of necessity be intimate, requiring someone who is a diligent student of human nature. This leader must be cunning, flexible, exacting, and generous — a Machiavellian figure or a Confucian gentleman.

Over time, even those board members who are most active and interested in the library will tend to become bored or less energetic. It is highly desirable to have terms of service. A year is usually too short, five years too long; two- to three-year terms are usually best. Overlapping terms are desirable to keep the board from changing over completely at one time. Old friends who have done their service, but who still do an occasional favor or who have a special contact, may be usefully honored by appointment to an advisory group or auxiliary board. This group can exist only on your letterhead, or it can meet over tea and discuss old times; it can even be an active functioning group in its own right.

The size of the board depends on a number of factors: how much there is to do, the internal dynamics of the group, and optimum working size. A group of six, for example, might be too small, too close, too boring. On the other hand, a group of thirty might be too diffuse, too impersonal, too unwieldy. There are no hard and fast rules, and the right solution at one

time will change over the years. An additional consideration is the style of the president of the group. Some people are superb in work with groups of five or six, but totally ineffective at running a meeting with twenty-five people. Other leaders are in their element with large groups, but wrong in small groups — their gaze is too lofty; they project too far into the room; their manner is excessive for the nature of the contacts.

Board meetings must be scheduled often enough so that the work gets done, and so that there is a sense of continuing involvement. If there are too many meetings, participation will be a burden. Too few meetings will give a feeling of discontinuity. Such matters must be worked out for each group and each organization. If there seems to be too much to get through at each meeting, have more frequent meetings or have the issues flushed out in smaller and (one hopes) more efficient committees.

Auxiliary boards may prove useful in organizing special events, providing specific services, and generally taking pressure off of the friends group itself. In addition, such boards can be a proving ground for future board members of the friends group, a retirement home for former board members, a platform for figureheads, and a not-dishonorable dumping ground for failed experiments.

A productive and successful friends group is the product of innumerable relationships, contacts, and activities. It is a system in which each of the components somehow fuels the others over time, generating programs and new activities, reaching a larger body of people, and producing a continually enlarging series of contacts and potential activities. When all of the pieces are properly assembled, activities seem to grow out of each other, magically and seemingly without effort. When the organization, for whatever reason, is on the wrong track, the simplest activities seem to require enormous expenditures of energy to go no place.

Meanwhile, tensions often arise between the library staff, the administration, and the friends group. At worst, the friends group looks on the administration as dull hacks; the administration looks at the friends group as a necessary evil to be tolerated and manipulated; and the staff sees both groups as being out of touch with the day-to-day realities of the library. When communication under such conditions tends to be poor, the friends group is generally unproductive and not well organized. The administration in turn feels resentful because there is no sustained involvement on the part of the friends.

The model for the nonprofit organizations comes largely from the profit-making corporations which are founded and often run by strong, tough, hard-nosed, John Wayne-type individualists. The strengths and weaknesses of this model are refracted when they are translated from the corporate to

the nonprofit world. Strong leadership is essential; but there is also another model which complements and balances it, derived from the experience of many in my own generation working in collectives of varying sorts. My limited understanding of the organization of Japanese business suggests that one sees it there as well. This model is one of consensus. It is built on the premise that every member of the group will have a veto power which can be exercised at any time with respect to any decision of the organization. This veto can be either an explicit right, or simply an unstated working principle. For those of us on the outside, used to majority rule, it looks pretty scary. In practice, the exercise of the veto places a very heavy responsibility on anyone who would choose to exercise it — except perhaps the inveterate troublemaker. In my experience, though, every time a veto has been used, there has been good reason, some problem to which the rest of the group was not as sensitive. Group pressure tends to discourage the use of the veto. The veto right creates and assures a feeling of solidarity: all of the group decisions have the force and commitment of the whole group behind them. The limitation of the model is a certain built-in slowness. A time-consuming process is called for, one which requires patience as well as the development of a certain kind of grace, which is generally lacking in much of our socialized behavior.

In conclusion, these points regarding the board seem to be in order:

1. The board members should be effective individually in their work.
2. They should have complementary talents.
3. They should be representative of the interests served by the organization.
4. The board should be large enough to get all of the work done, but small enough to be intimate.
5. There should be clear organizational patterns and good communication between the board and the library staff.
6. It is essential to have good working relationships among the board, the staff, and the organization's executive.
7. The board should have a total sense of the organization's objectives.
8. The board should know to what degree these objectives are being realized by the organization.
9. The members should be comfortable with one another.
10. Each member should feel involved with the work of the board and the progress of the organization.
11. The board should have specific goals.
12. The board should make policy decisions only after talking to all concerned parties; it should not operate in a vacuum.
13. The board should enjoy good relations with its community.
14. Members should derive a sense of achievement from their board work.